

Giving and Receiving Criticism

In normal day-to-day activities, STPs find themselves in circumstances requiring them to give corrective feedback or constructive criticism to others, or to receive similar messages concerning their own work. These circumstances always create communication challenges. Though giving critical feedback certainly is easier than receiving it, most STPs find dealing with people's reactions to their comments frustrating at best. The ability to deliver critical messages appropriately demands exceptional communication skill, and once again, it is a skill in which people rarely get any training. Even more difficult is accepting negative comments, constructive criticisms, or critical judgments about one's work; this is difficult for everyone and especially so for STPs like you, who take such great pride in their work and make such a high personal investment in what they do. Recall that in our communication model, communication has two components: content of the message and emotional impact of the communication. Giving and receiving critical comment has the potential to trigger a nega-



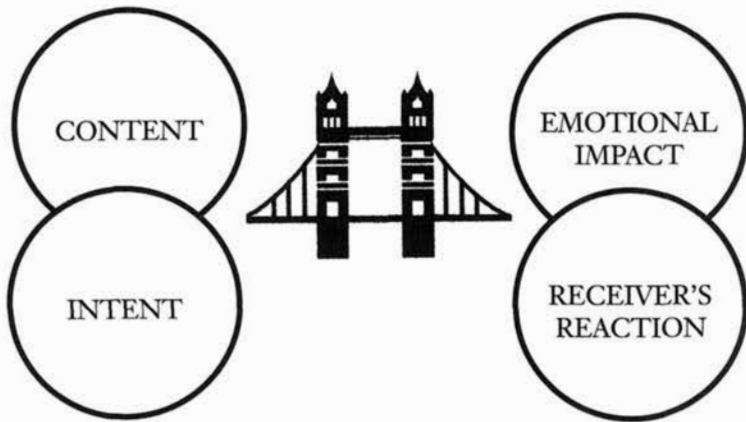
tive emotional response in the receiver. When delivering these messages, you must maintain a keen awareness of the possible impact your communication will have on the receiver. You may have to adjust your delivery to neutralize or minimize the negative reaction. Skillful and effective adjustment on your part increases the probability that the receiver will process the information in a positive, constructive way. By the same token, when you are on the receiving end of this type of critical feedback, it is important that you control your own internal emotional reaction and minimize any impulsive negative or defensive responses. This is certainly easier said than done, but you can learn and implement the skills if your commitment to succeed is high.

You may downplay or dismiss the negative reaction your criticisms create in others. At times you are probably quick to suggest that people should “deal with it” or “get over it” and “just accept what I’m telling you and move on.” For most of you, it is relatively easy to see negative reactions in others as signs of emotionalism, fragility, and weakness. While you may be quick to judge others, you probably react just as emotionally when someone else’s critical comments are directed at you. Perhaps it’s part of human nature to believe that when we offer critical comment and constructive criticisms to others, we are right in doing so, yet when they offer them to us, they are unreasonable, unfair, and misguided. When I do it to you . . . it’s okay. When you do it to me, it’s not!

You are probably very frustrated when others react negatively to your comments. You expect your communication to be judged by the *intent* of your message, which you of course perceive to be totally fair, necessary, positive, and only intended to increase knowledge and performance. By being focused on the intent, you absolve yourself of responsibility for any negative reaction your message may create in the receiver. You may actually feel, “It’s what I intend to communicate that matters, not what was actually said.” How often do you hear people defend themselves with statements similar to, “Well, that’s not what I meant to say . . . it’s not my fault if you took it the wrong way”? It’s as if these people expect others to read their minds and decipher their intended message and disregard what they actually said. Instead of listening with your ears, they want you to listen with your “psychic powers.” Conversely, when on the receiving end of critical messages, these same people are quick to judge the impact of the messages on themselves and not the intent of the deliverer. Isn’t it interesting how we all seem to want it both ways! This inconsistency, while understandable, obviously does not contribute to overall effective communication.

Packaging Your Criticisms Effectively

Despite the temptation to dismiss the importance of the emotional impact your critical messages have on others, in reality you are responsible for delivering these messages with tact and understanding. Receivers' reactions are just as intense and justified as your reaction is when you are the receiver of the critical comment.



This requires us to add an additional layer to our communication model:

Effective communication demands the building of an additional bridge between message intent and the receiver's reaction. Expecting receivers to judge the message strictly on the basis of what you intended to say and to disregard their own reaction is making the assumption that others can read your mind!

CASE STUDY 1

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Sandra is an IT quality assurance engineer for a company that designs patient information and diagnostic software for hospitals. When the program designers are confident that their products are ready to be released to customers, Sandra challenges and evaluates the system prior to its being approved for distribution to the end user. Her primary area of responsibility is to test beta software, software not yet ready to put on the

market, for both ease of use and the existence of any bugs within the program. Her job is literally to find flaws in the work of others.

When weaknesses in the system are found she is responsible for communicating her findings back to the program design department and working closely with them to correct the problems she has identified.

This process requires that she deliver critical comments to others while continuing to maintain a close working relationship. She says, "That is the toughest part of my job. I have to point out mistakes to people who don't think they make mistakes and then help to fix the problems without their seeing me as an intrusion on their authority or expertise."

In the past, she has experienced some significant communication problems, and one design programmer actually resigned because she thought Sandra's criticisms were unfair. Sandra sought help in dealing with her communication challenges.

First, let's consider some general assumptions that you and Sandra can make when giving critical comment to others:

- They probably don't want to hear it!
- They won't necessarily like what you tell them.
- They will want to defend their position and challenge yours.
- It is not necessary for them to agree with your message, but it certainly is necessary that they accurately comprehend its content.
- Some people have a greater ability and willingness to accept critical messages and learn from them than others.
- Factors such as maturity, experience, and realistic self-assessment dramatically affect this communication process.

Even though Sandra is only doing her job when she discovers problems and provides feedback, she is still responsible for doing so in a way that is not offensive to the receiver. What can be done to successfully deliver critical comment? Here are six recommendations.

1. Be Tactful

Do not become so focused on the content and intention of your message that you dismiss the importance of the emotional impact it will have on the receiver. No matter how much you believe someone deserves to be criticized or how frustrated you may be with the person's lack of performance,

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Dignity and respect must be maintained at all times.

cooperation, or faulty conclusions and assumptions, you are not absolved of the responsibility to use tactful communication.

You do not have the right to be undignified or disrespectful just because you believe it is warranted. This is especially important if you have an emotional involvement with the message you are delivering. Some of you take great pride in perceiving yourselves to be just “honest, straightforward people who tell it like it is.” Critical comments are frequently prefaced by qualifying statements such as: “The only way I know how to say it is to lay it right on the line and tell you the truth” or “I’m going to tell you this for your own good.” If Sandra’s critical comments were delivered in this style, the message that followed may have been received as searing and painful criticism. It may have been perceived as a personal attack or indictment with no apparent regard for the emotional impact on the receiver (some STPs actually intend to create a negative reaction). By pre-qualifying statements when delivering your critical comments, there is a self-serving assumption that it is no longer necessary to use tact and show respect. This demonstrates a perception of “It’s okay for me to treat you unmercifully and have no regard for your well-being whatsoever as long as I issue a disclaimer first!” There are many mean-spirited, hurtful people who enjoy delivering painful messages under the guise of “truth.” What’s really interesting is that these same individuals scream the loudest when others do it to them. It is quite a consistent phenomenon that “the attack dog usually has very thin skin.”

One of the primary aspects of showing tact is to plan the location of where you will deliver any critical comments to someone. Such communication should always be delivered in a private, nonthreatening, neutral location. Never subject people to public embarrassment by confronting them in the presence of others. Your message will be meaningless as they react to defend themselves and lash out in retaliation. Regardless of the accuracy of

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Never structure communication to cause anyone to lose face.

your critical message, it is extremely difficult, or perhaps impossible, for them to agree in front of others.

Willingly subjecting anyone to public embarrassment is considered abusive behavior in today's workplace and demonstrates a clear lack of respect and selfish disregard of others.

2. Use Assertive, Not Aggressive, Communication

As discussed earlier, *you*-statements increase negative emotion and reduce the willingness of the receiver to absorb your message. Communicating critical comment aggressively shuts down the receiver's listening process and creates an inevitable defensive response. If you experience a high rate of defensiveness in others when you offer feedback or criticism, such as apparently was happening with Sandra, carefully check whether you have been using an aggressive communication style. You may be creating their reaction unknowingly and unintentionally.

Some examples:

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Always avoid you-based messages when delivering critical comment. Use assertive I- and we-based messages.

<i>Unacceptable</i>	<i>Acceptable</i>
"You're wrong."	"I don't agree."
"I saw what you did, you violated our policy."	"Tell me what it means when our policies are disregarded."
"Why did you do this? You didn't give me what I asked for."	"Help me understand why it was done this way" or "Help me understand what happened."

Receiving criticism or negative comment always takes people down. Listening becomes less efficient and perceptions of being picked on, treated unfairly, or persecuted escalate. Defensiveness sets in and people become contentious, aggressively justifying their actions, and trying hard to prove you wrong. When these negative emotions and behaviors manifest themselves, any possible positive outcome of your critical comment is lost.

3. Identify the Positive

To avoid generating defensiveness in others, you must blend critical comments with very clear positive statements. It's a good model or guideline to make two positive statements before delivering the critical comment (one positive comment is the *absolute* bare minimum; two should be the norm), and to conclude with an additional positive observation. The positioning of positive comments first accomplishes a number of things with your receivers:

- They are not subjected to criticism only.
- It establishes the fact that you have a balanced view of them and their work.
- It encourages them to listen more actively. When people say positive things to you, the intensity of your listening increases and you pay greater attention to the content of their messages.

Concluding with a positive observation ends the communication on a high note and encourages an overall positive reaction. Ending with a negative or critical statement results in the receiver having a prolonged negative reaction, which tends to fester.

When Sandra presents her feedback to the program designers, she should point out all of the positive aspects of the software they have created. If she only identifies the flaws, there will be a negative reaction.

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Critical comment must always be positioned between positive statements. Stand-alone negative messages create a predictable and understandably defensive response in the receiver.

Incorporating positive messages can be difficult, especially when you have an emotional investment in the problem or critical comment you are about to deliver. As difficult as it may be, you must not eliminate or fail to point out the positive. At times you may have to struggle to find positive things to say. Never use a shortage of time as an excuse for delivering negative-only messages. Your time constraints will not make their reaction any less damaging.

Regardless of how bad you perceive people to be or how big the problem they have created, there is something good in them somewhere. They breathe just fine! They drink water well! They walk upright with great ability! It's easy to focus on the negative; identifying positive comments takes talent and creativity.

The positive observations must be specific statements (not generalized) and should be related to the topic you are going to discuss. Once the tone has been set by the positive input, the critical comment follows.

Here is an example of what Sandra might say: "Jim, you have worked very hard on this software project and it appears that with your help we are going to build it right and complete it on time. You have done so many things right, and there are a couple of things we need to discuss. I have found this problem . . ." (or "Help me understand. . ." or "We need to do further work on this. . .").

Once the critical comment has been delivered and the information discussed, conclude the communication with an additional positive statement: "Another thing I've been impressed with is . . . and I'm very sure that we're going to be able to fix this and move on."

Please note, there is no *but* to cancel any positive statements!

Concluding with positive observations and optimistic statements helps to neutralize any negative emotional impact and discourages any tendency on the receiver's part toward prolonged anger or grudge holding. Negative

reactions or emotions do not linger if you have concluded on a positive note. This technique also reaffirms the overall positive message that the good outweighs the bad; the receiver will be more accepting of your message and committed to making corrections or behavior changes. Without positive follow-up statements, the communication concludes on a down note and negative reactions fester. Keep in mind, it takes no talent to deliver critical messages; it takes great talent to be able to deliver a critical message and have the receiver comprehend it, accept it, and demonstrate his or her willingness to respond in a positive way.

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Increase the number of stand-alone positive messages to your peers, boss, subordinates, and all others with whom you maintain consistent, ongoing, significant communication. Critical comments are more effective when they are the exception, not the norm.

If the only time the program design people hear from Sandra is when there is a problem, they will react negatively to everything she says. When negative-only messages are delivered consistently, receivers learn to shut down their listening activity and erect a communication barrier as soon as they see you coming. When they see you approaching, they probably say, “Here we go again. She never has anything good to say. All she ever wants to do is criticize.” Your message is rejected before you even begin to deliver it. History is an excellent teacher, and if your history teaches others to consistently expect a negative message, you have lost the communication battle before it’s begun.

Negative messages should not stand alone; positive messages, however, certainly can and must. The more positive messages people hear from you, the more meaningful your feedback and constructive criticisms. People are more willing to accept occasional negative communication when you have demonstrated a pattern of delivering a majority of positive messages.

You can easily identify the people in your working environment who only have contact or communication with you when there is a negative or critical message. You may have developed that same predictable reaction to them without realizing it. Is it possible people could currently have the same perceptions about you? Obviously, any such pattern is unintentional

on your part and you are probably unaware that it has occurred. Again, we judge harshly in others behaviors we often commit ourselves. A careful self-assessment of these possible negative communication patterns would be very beneficial. The good news is, they can be successfully reversed and repaired.

For example, consider how you react when a negatively patterned communicator approaches. You do everything possible to avoid engaging this person. If the communication is unavoidable, you really do not listen and process the message. You are planning your escape! Are there any signs that other people may be responding to you in a similar manner?

4. Depersonalize the Message

When preparing to deliver critical comments, assess your own emotional control at the moment. It may be wise to delay your communications to be sure you are not making mountains out of mole hills. Diffuse the negative impact of your critical comments by first examining the true intent of your message. If your message is emotionally influenced and truly intended to punish, threaten, intimidate, or emphasize your brilliance or expose the receiver's stupidity, then you are not prepared to have an effective communication. Chances are great that you will probably have something to apologize for when your emotions ebb. If so, the true relevance of your comments will be lost in your apology and emotionalism. Wait until you are ready to deliver a positive message focused on correction and not a critical message of negative judgment before you begin to communicate. Use time as a communication tool.

Avoid any comments that may be received as personal. Fix problems; do not assign blame. Focus on what happened, not on who did it. Structure your message to describe behavior, events, standards, procedures, expectations, and advantages.

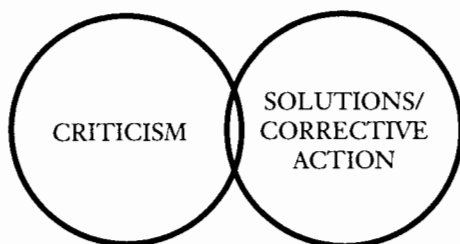
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When delivering constructive criticism or recommending corrective action, depersonalize the message by focusing on what has happened or what you want them to do differently.

5. Provide Suggestions for Corrective Action

It's not enough to tell people what they have done wrong. Offer suggestions for corrective action. Merely pointing out their failures, or exposing faulty conclusions and assumptions, no matter how legitimate your comments may be, is shallow and incomplete communication. It does not take a lot of talent to be a problem identifier; it is much more helpful to be a problem solver. Ideas or advice for corrective action must be presented in tandem with critical comment.



Combining specific recommendations or identifying corrective options, along with critical comments, creates an inclusive, complete communication and contributes to creating a positive outcome. Failing to do so creates negative, exclusive communication, which is generally perceived as blaming, ridicule, or intimidation.

This communication tandem of criticism and solution is especially important in group discussions or team meetings. Disagreeing or occasionally playing the devil's advocate is fine as long as you also demonstrate your willingness to make positive contributions by offering solution-oriented communication.

You are not helpful if you just identify problems. Become an asset by identifying and providing solutions.

6. Don't Dwell on the Past

Critical comment or constructive criticisms should focus only on the present and the future. Avoid engaging in emotional discussions of past negative events. The past is past. It is gone, do not try to resurrect it. Do not harbor grudges. Be sure your communications always address current events, not history lessons. If negative events have happened in the past, structure your current comments to focus on avoiding any repeats in the future.

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Do not allow your critical comments to lapse into history lessons.

Practice the 90/10 critical communication rule: Critical comment or constructive criticisms should focus 90 percent on fixing future behavior, or what we will do differently next time, and only 10 percent on what has already taken place.

If Sandra's feedback to the program designers contained comments on past flaws or somehow kept a running total of system problems, she should not be surprised at any negative reaction.

Unnecessary and unproductive references to past events only serve to increase the negative emotional impact on the receiver and decreases their ability and willingness to process your message.

Communication Assessment

1. Am I aware of the emotional impact my critical comments may have on the receiver of my message? (It is extremely beneficial to seek input from others to align your perceived awareness with their communication reality.) yes ☐ no ☐
2. Do I give equal importance to the emotional impact and content of my messages? yes ☐ no ☐
3. Do I realize the effectiveness of my communication lies in the receiver's actual reaction to the message and not in what I intended to say? yes ☐ no ☐
4. Do I avoid an aggressive use of the word *you* in delivering critical comment? yes ☐ no ☐
5. Do I use appropriate positive messages when delivering critical comments? yes ☐ no ☐
6. Do I consistently deliver stand-alone positive messages to my peers, boss, and other critical communication points?
yes ☐ no ☐
7. Do I examine the true intent of my message before delivering critical comments? yes ☐ no ☐

8. Do I consciously depersonalize negative messages?
yes ☐ no ☐
9. Do I avoid offering critical comment in public or other potentially embarrassing situations? yes ☐ no ☐
10. Do I always keep my comments current and avoid any negative historical references in my critical comments? yes ☐ no ☐

Any *no*-responses identify an opportunity to improve your communication effectiveness.

CASE STUDY 2

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Ken is a design programmer with Sandra's company. He expressed great frustration and resentment toward Sandra. "She never has anything good to say about my work. She is always finding fault. I work very hard and I am very good at what I do. I'm tired of her always harping about flaws in the programs I design. She is never satisfied. I am not the only one who has problems with Sandra. Another designer, Beth, quit last month because of Sandra's constant criticism of her work and I don't blame her. Sandra was always picking on Beth and me; now it's just me. She thinks she is so much smarter than everyone else. The problems she finds are usually very small and easily corrected. But she makes a big deal out of them and lets everybody else know that 'Ken screwed up.' The other five designers seem to do okay with Sandra, but she sure has it in for me. They are afraid of her. I'm the only one who will stand up to her around here and I'm not going to do it much longer. When I see her coming, I find somewhere else to go. I don't even want to talk to her."

Receiving Criticism

Receiving critical comments or negative feedback concerning our performance, behaviors, conclusions, or decisions is never a pleasant experience. Emotionally healthy, mature people can generally accept feedback that is unflattering as long as it is well intended and effectively delivered; however, no one truly relishes the experience. Developing this communication skill will contribute to improved performance, better working relationships, and establish you as an exceptional STP! The better you are at accepting and processing criticism, the more you stand out from the group.

This requires you to take some measure of responsibility for your own emotional response. Learn to manage yourself and do not allow others to exercise control over you by making it easy for them to push your buttons.

From Sandra and Ken's description of the communication problems they encounter, it is difficult to determine any single source of responsibility. Undoubtedly, there is opportunity for communication improvements on all sides. It is interesting that Sandra acknowledges the problem and is seeking help. Ken merely blames Sandra and apparently perceives that his communication skills are not an issue. Unfortunately, this is not an uncommon scenario for many STPs when they are on the receiving end of information they do not want to hear.

Obviously, Sandra must assess her communication skills and increase her effectiveness in using tact, avoiding an aggressive or provoking style, and emphasizing the positive aspects as well as her points of criticism. She must also concentrate on depersonalizing her message and keep her comments focused on the project or the work and not the person. By the nature of what she does, working with the design programmers to fix the flaws, she is probably doing a good job of providing corrective action. It is extremely important that her corrective recommendations be presented in a spirit of collaboration, not self-perceived superiority. Sandra must also avoid any tendency to dwell on past events.

Regardless of where the responsibility for the miscommunication lies, you can see the disturbing results. Sandra feels hindered in her ability to do her job, the collaborative interaction between her and the program designers has deteriorated, and a valuable employee has apparently resigned, at least in part because of the negative emotional impact Sandra's communication had on her. Current productivity is suffering and negative emotions and reactions are prevalent, especially anger, resentment, and perceptions of being picked on or singled out for criticism. Improvements in communication are obviously necessary.

Let's now turn our attention to Ken. There are a number of things he must consider about his role in this communication process. First and foremost, he must develop a mature understanding of the importance of critical comment, appreciate the value of having his work reviewed, and overcome the tendency to take criticism very personally.

The Value of Seeking Honest Feedback

As difficult and frustrating as receiving critical comment from others can be, it is also some of the most valuable information you can ever receive.

Ken obviously has not yet achieved this awareness. Seeking out and accepting honest, critical feedback has an unparalleled positive impact on your performance and career growth. In reality, feedback from others is truly a gift they offer if we are willing to receive it. It is a wise and mature professional who can recognize the value of this gift. It not only helps us to grow, it provides valuable insight into how we are perceived by others. Though we may not like it, it is truly good for us. It is utterly naïve and an example of professional denial for you to perceive that everything you do is perfect and leaves no room for growth or improvement. Such self-perceived perfection only serves to reduce the quality of work, inhibit growth, and stall careers. Intellectually, most of you acknowledge the importance of receiving occasional critical comment or constructive criticism about your work, yet the reality of hearing these messages and dealing with the negative impact on your own emotions can be a challenge. We all have personal strengths and weaknesses and experience peaks and valleys in our overall performance.

Reacting negatively to critical comment or constructive criticism is interpreted by others as immaturity and perceived to be hard evidence that you are unwilling or incapable of evaluating your work objectively. You damage others' positive perceptions of you, or perhaps reinforce existing negative ones, by your inappropriate responses to constructive feedback. When you read Ken's comments, you probably find yourself reacting negatively to his perceptions.

It is in your best interest not only to learn to accept and process critical comments effectively, but also to seek out opportunities to obtain honest feedback. This will be the cornerstone, along with your own self-awareness, for future growth and increased competence.

There are seven specific areas in which to consistently seek evaluation and constructive critical comment from peers, your boss, and others who constitute your critical communication points:

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Consistently provide others the opportunity to offer constructive criticisms of your efforts.

1. The overall quality of your work
2. Your ability to control costs and address budget concerns and constraints
3. Your ability to consistently meet deadlines
4. Your overall skills in critical thinking and problem solving
5. The quality of your decision making
6. The depth of your creativity
7. Your skill levels in personal organization; people skills such as conflict resolution, customer service, working collaboratively; and communication

Separating Work from Self

As previously discussed, frequently STPs can be so immersed in their work that it is difficult to determine where performance ends and self-worth begins. Criticism of your work may be interpreted as highly personal comments attacking integrity, intellect, or value. Sandra made the statement, “I wish I could talk to Ken about his work and not have him react as if we are talking about him.” It is a rare and valuable skill to be able to separate your work from yourself.

Following are some guidelines for improving your ability to process criticism:

Give Others Permission to Disagree with You. Allowing others to have a viewpoint different from yours raises your tolerance and increases your ability to listen and process their input. Accomplishing this begins with the simple step of acknowledging that no matter whether the critical input of others is right or wrong, valid or invalid, they have a right to their perceptions and opinions. This does not necessarily mean you agree with their viewpoint; it merely means that you are willing to listen to their input and give it fair consideration. It is your obligation not to “shoot the messenger” or dismiss this input. Points of disagreement can be viewed as starting points from which to begin negotiation—they are not a declaration of war. Just because others have critical comments about certain aspects of your work or portions of your assumptions and conclusions does not mean they totally reject everything that you have done. Agreement or approval of your work is not an all-or-nothing proposition. Apparently, Ken interprets criticism of any part of his work to be a total rejection of everything he has done and of him personally as well. It seems as if Sandra is not allowed to disagree with him!

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Repeatedly say to yourself, “Not everyone thinks as I do, and others have a right to see things their way.”

Accept Critical Comment with a Commitment to Learn. When others offer critical comment, seize it as an opportunity to learn something. If you are open to it, their input can help you to. . .

- . . . consider alternatives or options
- . . . better understand their thought process
- . . . form a clearer view of the bigger picture
- . . . identify more efficient ways of dealing with the task
- . . . develop an assessment of where your vulnerabilities may lie
- . . . see how others’ priorities may differ from yours

Lower the Stakes. Every discussion is not a battle that must be won. The price of disagreement in a discussion does not have to be monumental. Ken appears to be escalating the stakes. It sounds as though he has raised Sandra’s criticism to a level of importance that demands that he leave his job. You do not have to quit, take yourself off the project, request a transfer, or refuse to support someone else’s efforts just because things do not go your way. Do not perceive every incident of critical comment as a call to arms; most things are just not that important. Some battles are worth fighting, some are not. Do not allow the stakes to become so high in every disagreement that the other party must be defeated, and if not, that somehow equals a defeat for you. There are times when you must stand your ground

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Repeatedly say to yourself, “Whether or not I agree, I can still learn something from these comments.”

This will help to defeat your initial negative response to what they are saying.

and be willing to do whatever is necessary to carry the day. However, those circumstances are few and far between. Threatening to take an adverse action every time someone offers criticism or there is a disagreement is an unpleasant behavior in children and an immature, self-defeating behavior in adults.

Depersonalize the Issue. In the earlier discussion on giving critical comment to others, we emphasized the importance of depersonalizing the issue—focusing on *what* the issue is and not *who* is involved. The same principle holds true when you are receiving critical comment. Take the *who* out of it, and in this case, the *who* is you. Ken obviously needs to raise his awareness on this issue. Do not allow yourself to see critical comment that is directed toward your work or productivity as a personal confrontation, or an attack on your competency, integrity, or intellect. You as a person are separate and distinct from your work. Allow others to be critical of what you do without perceiving their observations to be personal.

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Do not interpret statements of disagreement, contention, or critical comments as personal attacks.

One effective technique is to reassure yourself, “This is not about me. This is about a thing [the work, the conclusion] and not about me personally.” Just as you recognize your ability to criticize the work of others without attacking them personally, allow others to do the same with you.

Seek Solutions. When others offer critical comment, assume they are also offering themselves as a consultant or a resource to help you in correcting the problem. If they just offer criticism without identifying options for correction, probe their intellect for solutions.

Use assertive probing questions to begin to identify alternatives:

“Help me understand how I could have done this differently.”

“What are some options for verifying [correcting, overcoming] this?”

“May I hear your thoughts on a better way of dealing with this?”

Instead of perceiving critics as adversaries, invite them to be your allies and to collaborate on mutually acceptable outcomes. Do not make them the problem; invite them to become a part of the solution. If you are willing to listen, they probably have some worthwhile insights to share.

Listen for Accuracy, not Emotion. In later chapters, we will be discussing effective listening techniques. At this point, be aware that everyone has a tendency to listen from a position of preconceived perceptions. The truth is, most people determine ahead of time what they are going to hear, and then they listen to reinforce that expectation. You hear what you want or expect to hear. This is often referred to as selective listening, and everyone is susceptible to it, some to a much greater degree than others. No one is immune. Examine critical messages for content and avoid emotional reactions. Ken expects criticism from Sandra (which is actually a part of her job), and when she offers it, he responds emotionally and his ability to learn from or process her information evaporates.

For example, if you think one of your peers (or your boss, supervisor, manager, etc.) is incompetent and incapable of quality performance, you will judge everything the person says and does through the filter of negative judgment. When the person makes a mistake (and everyone does from time to time), you will seize upon that as proof and reinforcement of your accurate perception. When the person does something right, you will discount that and perhaps attribute it to "luck." These negative perceptions, once imbedded in your listening and interpretation process, make accurate reception of messages extremely difficult. Listen carefully for the specific components of the person's critical comments, and do not muddy the emotional waters with selective listening.

Communication Assessment

1. Do I seek honest, accurate feedback from others?
yes ☐ no ☐
2. Do I allow others to disagree with me without judging their perceptions negatively? yes ☐ no ☐
3. Do I seize the critical comments of others as valuable learning opportunities? yes ☐ no ☐
4. Do I attempt to de-escalate the stakes in circumstances of disagreement? yes ☐ no ☐
5. Do I depersonalize critical comments and avoid taking criticisms of my work personally? yes ☐ no ☐

6. Am I able to separate myself from my work and view criticisms objectively? *yes* ☐ *no* ☐
7. Do I seek the input of those who offer critical comments in the correction process? *yes* ☐ *no* ☐
8. Do I listen unemotionally to critical comments? *yes* ☐ *no* ☐

Any *no*-responses indicate opportunities to improve your communication effectiveness.

An Effective Model for Processing Critical Comments

There are four specific steps you can take to process critical comments constructively.

Clarify
Acknowledge
Identify
Establish criteria

Step 1. Clarify. Ask for specific examples of the performance or behaviors that are being criticized. Critical comment that is general in nature is meaningless and only escalates your negative emotion. You cannot respond positively and fix problems or correct behaviors that are identified in vague general terms. If someone is offering criticisms of your work, it won't help you if the person uses general statements such as the following:

"This doesn't make sense."
"This report is inaccurate."
"Your conclusions are totally wrong."
"This work is not acceptable."

These are not specific comments. They are not clear enough to help you identify the root issues. Everything you have done, reported, or concluded is not wrong. The most effective way to help your critics become more specific in their observations is to ask for more information. It is important to monitor the structure of these questions, as well as your tone of voice and body language. If you are not careful, you run the risk of appearing

challenging, condescending, or insubordinate, and none of these messages are in your best interest. Use phrases such as:

“Exactly what happened that may be open to question?”

“Which parts of the report may be in error?”

“Are there specific conclusions we can discuss?”

“Help me understand where the specific problems lie.”

The key to successfully maintaining positive inquiry and not allowing the communication to degenerate into contention is implementing *assertive* communication with no trace of any *you*-based aggressive messages.

Step 2. Acknowledge. Let your critics know that you acknowledge the appropriateness of their input and perceptions, welcome it, and are willing to consider and learn from their insight. (This does not necessarily mean you agree.) It is usually appropriate to compliment them on the quality and depth of their thoughts and observations. Doing so reduces any adversarial positioning and invites them to be more helpful rather than critical in their comments. It also sends a very strong message that you have the maturity and confidence to be willing to accept differing points of view and observations.

Helpful statements you can make include:

“Obviously, you have put a lot of thought into this and I appreciate your insight.”

“Your opinions are important to me and I appreciate your efforts in helping me improve.”

“I have always found your input to be very insightful and I take your comments very seriously.”

Step 3. Identify. As with seeking specific clarification of the criticism, it is important to identify the steps that must be taken to remedy the situation and correct mistakes. You cannot respond effectively to generalized suggestions such as these:

“You need to work harder.”

“You need to improve the quality of your work.”

“You need to broaden your observations.”

These statements do not help you understand what the critic wants you to do. He or she obviously has an expectation of changed behavior. You cannot possibly respond appropriately to the criticism if the critic is unable to clearly communicate her expectation.

Use the same types of clarifying questions as you used in Step 1:

“Help me understand *exactly* what it is that I can do differently.”

“What is the single *most* important thing I can do to correct this?”

“What is the most effective *specific* action I can take?”

If you fail to clarify the specific correction necessary, it becomes a heavy burden on you. You are expected to read your critic’s mind and try to guess what she wants done. Chances are great that this will only lead you down the path to further criticisms. (You can’t work harder or do better if you do not know what those phrases mean to the critic.) The key lies in avoiding generalizations.

Step 4. Establish criteria. An extremely important and often overlooked part of the process of successfully receiving and reacting to critical comment is the establishment of criteria to measure the effectiveness of your action as a result of the criticism. You must determine how the critic (and any other key people who may be involved) are actually going to measure your response or correction. A key question to consistently pose is “How will we know this has been successfully dealt with?” If you are going to take the corrective action, it’s not enough for you to know that you have done it; others must also be aware of your response. How the method of measurement or notification is determined really doesn’t matter. What does matter is that everyone involved agrees as to what it is. Others should not rely merely on taking your word that you have made a correction. You may perceive that you’ve done it, while they may perceive that you have not. This only prolongs and exacerbates the situation. Clearly identify what the proof points are so that everyone will have a consistent understanding of the measurement criteria.

In concluding this chapter, I offer this thought: “Positive feedback always feels better and affirms your worth. Negative feedback properly received increases your value.”¹